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THE DEPRIVED CHILD--HIS GIFT TO EDUCATION.

BY- MELBY, ERNEST O.

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ONE PART OF THIS BULLETIN CRITICIZES THE ASSUMPTION THAT ALL CHILDREN MUST LEARN THE SAME MATERIAL AT A GIVEN AGE AND AT THE SAME RATE AS THEIR PEERS. THE PRESENT CRISIS IN EDUCATION, PARTICULARLY FOR THE DEPRIVED CHILD, RESULTS FROM THE STRESS PLACED ON CONTENT RATHER THAN ON HELP FOR EACH CHILD TO GROW AS A HUMAN BEING. A MOST DAMAGING ASPECT OF THIS EDUCATIONAL VIEWPOINT IS THE MARKING SYSTEM, WHICH SHOULD BE ABANDONED COMPLETELY. IT IS IRRELEVANT AS A MEASURE OF HUMAN GROWTH, DESTRUCTIVE OF SELF-CONCEPT, AND STULTIFYING TO MOTIVATION FOR LEARNING. STANDARDS SHOULD BE BASED ON AN INDIVIDUAL'S CAPACITY AND GROWTH, NOT ON COMPARISONS WITH OTHERS. THE BREAKDOWN OF INNER-CITY SCHOOLS DEMONSTRATES THAT THE MARKING SYSTEM AND ASSOCIATED EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES DO NOT SIGNIFY AN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM BUT RATHER A KIND OF "SCHOLASTIC ESTABLISHMENT." THE DOCUMENT CONTAINS A RESPONSE TO THIS ARGUMENT WHICH CRITICIZES ITS DISPROPORTIONATE EMPHASIS ON THE INADEQUACIES OF THE MARKING SYSTEM. ALSO INCLUDED IS AN ADDENDUM WITH FURTHER REMARKS ON GRADING PRACTICES. THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN "THE COMMUNITY SCHOOL AND ITS ADMINISTRATION," VOLUME 4, NUMBER 12, AUGUST 1966. (NH)

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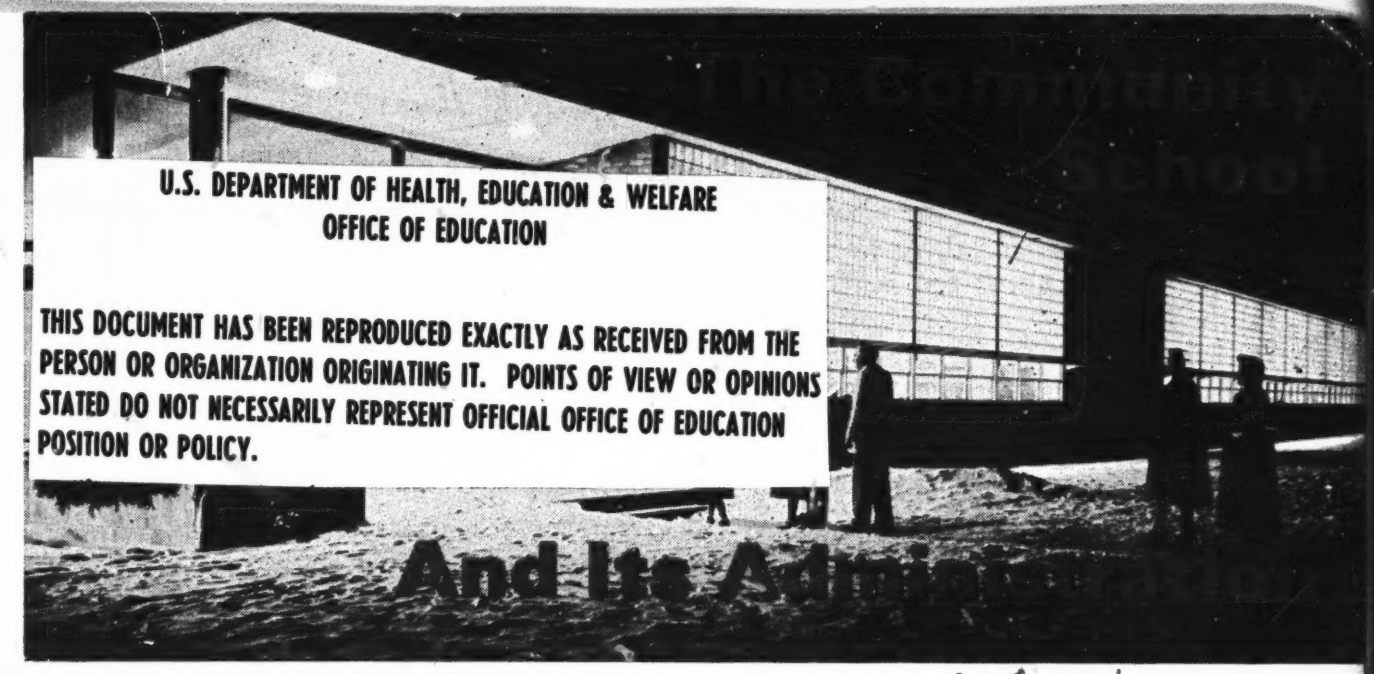

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The Deprived Child: His Gift To Education

By DR. ERNEST O. MELBY, Distinguished Professor of Education, Michigan State University

Dr. Ernest Melby's article appeared in the June issue of the Mott Institute for Community Improvement. Since the material relates dramatically to the inherent texture of the Mott program and typifies distinctly the thought streams of the Flint faculty, I have asked permission to run a reprint and a passage from Dr. A. Harry Passow's evaluation of the same. To sharpen the point of conflict on grading, I shall set forth a few facets not mentioned in the essay — an elaboration in part to Dr. Melby's statements and still in another sense a reply to Dr. Passow's criticism that Dr Melby was disproportionate in his emphasis.

Belatedly, American educators are focusing their attention on the deprived child. In our large cities this child represents a third of the children. He is a problem. He does not learn. He causes trouble. He is unpleasant. The teachers do not like him and avoid teaching him if they can. But now many efforts are being made to help him. Such terms as High Horizons, Great Cities Project, Head Start, and Neighborhood Youth Corps, are becoming generally known and discussed. In all of this the deprived child is seen as a blot on our educational escutcheon which must somehow be removed. In this discussion I want to maintain that the deprived child is more than a mere exasperating problem. He has without knowing it, and often without his teachers being aware of it, made a vital gift to the progress of education. He is, so to speak, a mirror held up to our schools and communities in which we can see our shortcomings — our basic weaknesses which, of course, injure all children whether deprived or not, but which become critical when a deprived home and a bad community compound the weaknesses of the school.

Our schools were never designed to be true educational enterprises. They were set up to teach children a few knowledges and skills which children would be unlikely to learn in the process of growing up. What to teach in such a school is a question easily answered — it's the three R's. It's the same for all children. All children are expected to begin learning to read at the same chronological age, to progress at the same rate, to be together at 10 and at 15. All this flies in the face of what we know about children, their individual differences, uniqueness as organisms, and differences in experience in home and community. Oh, I know about the various schemes for grouping, the different curricular concepts and patterns of organization. But when all is said and done the fact remains that to have a good school life, to develop a good self-concept, every child must learn the same material at a given age, at an assumed rate, or he gets a low mark, develops a *dark* self-image, and convinces himself he cannot learn.

Dr. Ernest O. Melby

All this happens because the school thinks first of what children must learn and second of the child. We do not measure what school subjects do to the child. We measure what the child does to the subject. Two boys may get a "C" grade. One has learned to like school, to like to read. The other hates school and will not read unless he is forced to do so. Yet both boys are homogenized by the "C" grade.

Our teachers are partly to blame, but society, school boards, school administrators, and especially universities that prepare teachers are more

(Continued on next page)

to blame. We are all culpable. We have always assumed there would be failure. "This child is not academic." "He is not high school or college material." We sound like the manager of a furniture factory rejecting pieces of lumber in making tables. Pieces with large knots or rotted places go on the scrap heap. We in the school, also, have a scrap heap. In the view of those who study the problem this scrap heap comprises a third of the children. Few manufacturing establishments could survive with that large a scrap pile.

The scrap pile of dropouts, juvenile delinquents, bitter youth full of hate is frightening enough but it is only part of our problem. Earl Kelley has said we can't even count our dropouts because most of them stay in school. The weaknesses of our schools which become critical to the deprived child injure the average and gifted children who remain in school getting passing or better marks and graduate. They are the "A" history students who never read any more history; the bright students who never learned how to work, and most important of all, the rank and file who learned facts and acquired skills but failed to develop as human beings. They failed to *become* because their teachers helped them to learn but not to *become.*

An easy answer to the problem is to advocate more stress on the humanities and more "character education," but some humanities and specialists are brittle, shallow people whose qualifications rest on what they know and not what they are. "Character education" can be as deadly as subject matter education. Children are not born *human.* Humanity must be acquired, learned. We become human through creative living with other human beings who have concern for our common humanity, who treat us in terms of our uniqueness as individual human beings, who study us and help us to plan our education. Such persons (teachers) help us most when they build our self-confidence and self-respect, when they join us in learning and when they believe in us and care about us.

It is our failure to respect the child, to believe in him and to care for him that banishes the deprived child to the outer darkness, and that limits the growth of average and above average children.

In the past we could perhaps salve our consciences by assuming our failing pupils would get unskilled jobs. But now the unskilled jobs are disappearing fast and higher level jobs are growing in complexity, demanding the better educated worker. An education equivalent to high school graduation is a must for every individual if he is to have any kind of life as a participant in our over-developed society.

Moreover, such education can be provided for *all* if we but sense the problem — if we realize the weaknesses of our present programs, if we make the growing child the focus of our effort rather than the subject-matter we try to teach him. All this we can see clearly in the mirror which the deprived child holds up to us. He is a testing laboratory in which traditional schooling is put to the test. It fails because it is centered in what is taught rather than in the learner. Accordingly the child learns he *cannot* learn. If one is to learn and keep on learning, one must begin by learning that he *can* learn. The self-concept of the child after a day in school is far more important than what knowledge or skill he has acquired.

In the mirror held up for us by the deprived child we can also see the damage done to children by our obsolete marking system. Periodically, one or more writers come forth with suggestions for the improvement of the marking system. Perhaps their suggestions might be desirable. But I have long ago reached the conclusion that the marking system itself is damaging in its impact on the education of our children and youth and that it should go the way of the hickory stick and dunce caps. It should be abandoned at all levels of education.

Our marking system is no longer relevant to the needs and educational programs of our society. It says nothing meaningful about a pupil. It glosses over exceptional effort on the part of some pupils and lack of effort on the part of others. It says nothing about the most important outcomes of education. It leads us to measure the outcomes of our educational programs in terms of what people know, when we ought to be measuring them in terms of what people are and are in process of becoming. It tells us a little about what the pupil has done to the subject he studies but nothing about what his study of the subject has done to him. We think we must use this worn out system to motivate pupils, but all the studies I have seen show that marks have no motivating effect.

But the marking system is not only irrelevant and mischievous. It is de-

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structive. It destroys the self-concepts of millions of children every year. Note the plight of the deprived child. He often enters school at six with few of the pre-school experiences the middle class children bring to school. We ask him to learn to read. He is not ready to read. We give him a low mark – we repeat the low mark for each marking period – for each year, often for as long as the child remains in school. At the end of perhaps the ninth grade, the child drops out of school. What has he learned? He has learned he cannot learn. We have told him so several dozen times. Why should he think otherwise?

We have lied to him. He *can* learn. If we were worth our salt as teachers and as a school we should have taught him he can learn. We should have asked him to do things he can do, not what we know he can't do. Every day we should have sent him home with more confidence in himself, liking himself better than when he came in the morning.

But don't tell me it's only the deprived who suffer from our marking system. All children are injured. They are injured because they are induced to seek the wrong goals – to be satisfied when their performance reaches a given level rather than when they have done their best. They are injured because they develop a dislike for subjects in which they get a low grade, literature for example. Often these dislikes are lifelong. Think of all the college graduates and high school graduates who dislike mathematics for example. The low grade they received told them they were deficient in mathematical ability when in most cases they were merely the victims of bad teaching.

When I say these things about our obsolete marking system, someone always asks "What shall we tell the parents about the child?" "What shall we report to the university?" My answer is let us be both informative and conducive to the growth of the pupil's self-concept. Let us describe his growth in meaningful terms that are really descriptive of the pupil's effort, unique qualities, interests, attitudes, and behaviors. As for standards, we should evaluate each pupil in terms of his own capacity and growth, not in comparison with others who are very different. A slow learner may become a better self-actualizing person than a fast learner.

We should be engaged with parents in the joint undertaking of helping the pupil to grow as a self-actualizing person. Our marking system injures the self-concepts of many children and is an obstacle to self-actualization.

As for university entrance, from four years of high school experience we should be able to decide what kind of post high school education the student should undertake. We either recommend him to the state university or the junior college. You say on what basis?

When you go to the doctor for a history and physical check-up the doctor writes constantly as you talk describing your condition. He accumulates for you a medical history. He does not give you an "A" or a "B". He does not use meaningless terms which blot out your individuality.

Our work with deprived children is revealing the damage done to all children by our subject-matter minded emphasis. Here too we are in position to see the way children are injured by the marking system and associated educational practices. It is unlikely we would ever have fully realized how seriously we were failing to educate, had it not been for the testing of our schools in the city slum. Here they broke down, here they failed in a way that laid bare for all to see the fact we do not have a true educational system but a sort of scholastic establishment.

One can hope that as we recognize the extent and depth of the injury to children we will set about to build a true educational system which makes each child's growth the focus of our efforts, which is concerned with what the child is becoming and not only with what knowledge he is acquiring. If all this is accomplished the deprived child will have made a priceless gift to education.

COMMENTARY

by Dr. A. Harry Passow
PROFESSOR OF EDUCATION and CHAIRMAN,
Committee on Urban Education
Teachers College, Columbia University

(An Excerpt from his Commentary)

Dr. Melby is extremely critical of our marking system and its impact on individuals. Granting all the inadequacies, irrelevancies and injustices of present marking systems, it seems to me to be but part of the more general problem of conceiving of an education which considers and contributes to growth in *both* the affective and cognitive domains. When one considers the content of instruction, teaching methods employed, classroom climate, materials and resources, the inter-personal relations between pupils and adults and among peers – all the forces and factors which directly affect what a child learns, how he learns it, and how he perceives himself – Dr. Melby's criticism of the marking systems seems somewhat disproportionate. If schools abandoned all marks and grading (I assume that there is a place for diagnosis and evaluation in the educational process), we would still face major problems in developing individual potential, nurturing creativity, building self-esteem, raising aspirations – achieving the ends which would make of schools "true educational enterprises."

ADDENDUM

Grading – Past, Present, Future

Let me state in the beginning that marking pupils has been under fire for a long, long time. How long it would be difficult to conjecture. Certainly castigating the procedure is not new to professors, school administrators, or teachers. Each generation of educators, apparently from the very beginning of formal schools, has had its members who have been critical of rating procedures – a few vitriolic, a still larger number vehement but not necessarily caustic. But even more telling as a weighty argument against the marking practice is that few if any educators have defended the system as a desirable method of evaluation. It is somewhat like the frequently repeated cliche about the weather – everybody talks about it but nobody tries to change it. Let me quote two renowned scholars who speak about the subject with candor.

First, Arthur Jersild in his publication "In Search of Self."

> "The cards are stacked against many children. They are stacked when teachers, in league with the prevailing competitive pressures in our society, attach

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greater importance to certain achievements than they merit, and apply pressures which make the child feel that he is worthless in all respects because he does not happen to be a top performer in some respects. . . .

"Regardless of what the test constructors intended, and regardless of what the school's announced logic might be the fact is that many tests, as now employed, in effect tell a child that he is more or less a success or a failure and is more or less a worthy or a worthless character."

And second, T. V. Smith in his "Democratic Way of Life."

"It is deplorable that school authorities continue the use of examinations in every type of subject and thus lead pupils to believe that the chief aim of education is to pass examinations and receive grades but what is even more grievous is the fact that many teachers still think it pardonable to ask trick questions thus rendering the end even more difficult of achievement. Under these circumstances, it seems reasonable that more and more pupils might seek a trick means to this artificial end. The principal difficulty here, as well as in other contexts, is that end gainers sooner or later lose the capacity to enjoy their means. They become so pre-occupied in attaining ends that they regard the means as a boring compulsion, something to be endured but not enjoyed."

Now it is true that almost all schools have moved from number marks – 70, 75, 80, 90, 99 – to the letters – A, B, C, D, E, and F, and in some instances from the six letter system to the two of S and U – satisfactory and unsatisfactory. Likewise, more and more institutions have gone to no grades at all for children in the first three years of school. But expansion of the non-grading system beyond the early elementary years has not gained acceptance from parents, members of boards of education or faculty members themselves. In fact, one has to conclude if he looks at the hard realities that the graded report card really has been given strong support by both administrators and teachers throughout the years.

What Price Grades

I personally believe that Dr. Melby has expressed a timely note of warning. Conceivably, our unrelenting drive for high educational standards might well impair our fine intellectual judgments especially at the elementary and secondary school levels. To say it another way increased pressures on young people might backfire if it has not already. These are the kinds of frustations and aggressions that keep bringing anxieties to parents and others:

1. Youngsters in the elementary schools are developing ulcers because their grades may not permit them to enter college when they are graduated from high school.

2. Teachers to be certain that their A and B grades are respectable are assigning an increasing amount of home work – literally giving children more than they can think about, causing the learning to be distasteful to many and making it virtually impossible for the slow learner to achieve even a modicum of success.

3. Track systems, honor rolls, special banquets for high ranking pupils, university scholarships, and honors colleges are drawing invidious comparisons to those who may learn differently from these recognized pupils or perhaps learn in a different way.

4. And recently grades have been used to bring new painful frustrations to pupils like they never have been brought before. Students who receive good marks from their teachers are permitted to remain in college; those who are graded lower are required to march forth into battle.

"The Exiles"

Little purpose can be served by presenting further illustrations. The concern here is that pressures for grades may have a socially degrading effect on many young people. To say the same thing a bit more pointedly, the stresses and strains which many youngsters now undergo may be near the breaking point. Let me see if I can illustrate with a few down-to-earth examples.

1. Crime is on the increase by youthful offenders on a percentage basis and not just because more young people are in the total population.

2. Youth in their revolts are violent – not pillow throwing, water fights, pushing over "chick" sale

(Continued on next page)

rest houses, tieing cows in school buildings, and the like. Young people from the inner city and from middle and upper class homes are throwing Molotov cocktails, brick bats and other missiles at each other — through store windows and even at officers of the law. Their behavior resembles a frenzied kind of insurrection more than the release of youthful excess energy.

3. Those who are not inclined to fight back at society have been known to crack up mentally, develop ulcers, resort to drugs, and in extreme cases commit suicide.

Now it would be extravagant to say that grades are causing all these ills in society. There is no intention to leave this impression. How often marks do specifically ignite revolts could be a thought, subject to frequent speculation. The issue might be debated and much evidence presented for and against but let's leave this question to move to other phases of the overarching problem.

Grades Are Not Accurate Measurements

Studies show that teachers do not grade the same pupil's papers alike in English, history, foreign languages, or in the area of mathematics where there are supposed to be accurate answers. Research on this point received considerable attention three or four decades ago. Polarity in marking practice is not a recently discovered phenomenon; it is a fact known for years. To make a long story short, grades at best are subjective judgments even when people try to be dispassionate in their appraisals.

Teacher's Grades Favor Some, Reject Others

But what has been said is only a part of the evaluation complex. Fair and accurate teaching and grading is difficult because of prejudice. Prejudice is omnipresent with everyone in all evaluative operations. It creeps in even though individuals try to keep it out. By way of example, teachers without their realizing it may feel repelled at a child's color, his grooming, uncleanliness, or his personality traits in general. To say it another way the child's grade may be affected by whether he is rich or poor, attractive or unattractive, docile or rebellious in his behavior.

Grades Determine the Direction of Teaching and Learning

Student revolts may be just one possible evil in grading systems and not the most serious if social consequences are viewed over a long period of time. Let me see if I can point out two other features on teaching and grading that seem highly significant at the moment.

1. Pupils are becoming memorizers more than thinkers because examinations in the main call for this kind of study. Grades today are determined in large part from what young people have learned from books and lectures not their creative production. To say the same thing in a little different way, teaching methods and marks are making people alike much more than making them different.

2. Instruction is tending to degenerate into a power over situation with the teacher perched on a pedestal above the student, watching intently, ready to pounce on the slightest mistake that he makes. There seems to be little evidence in these settings of a Mark Hopkins on one end of a log and a student on the other — a Socrates saying to pupils "Look into your own selves and find the spark of truth that God has put into every heart and that only you can kindle into a flame" — no clear signs of building on the inherent talents in students — rather there seems to be a pouring in of content whether it can be assimilated or not.

Responsible Teaching and Grading

Really one is tempted to assume that only teachers who have pupils who perform seriously consider their teaching techniques. Let me illustrate. The football coach has to develop

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ur progeny may well live in a society which has developed an intelligence level as far above ours as our level is above that of our ancestors among medieval European peasants. After all, we have the same kind of brains — the same size and structure that Stone Age man had 30,000 years ago. Any advances that we have made in intellectual development since then have come not through better brains but through better use of them. Now, for the first time, we have the possibility of teaching a far larger part of our population how to think. For we are discovering that all human beings are vastly more improvable than almost anyone had dared to hope."

Readers Digest, May 1966

Dr. David Krech: "At Berkeley my colleagues and I working neither with drugs nor with implanted electrodes have obtained results which indicate that the anatomy and chemistry of the brain as well as the learning ability of the individual can be improved or crippled by providing a psychologically rich or a psychologically impoverished environment during the individual's youth."

Think Magazine, July-August 1966, page 3

Jerome S. Bruner: "Ideally, interest in the material to be learned is the best stimulus to learning rather than such external goals as grades for later competitive advantage."

The Process of Education, page 14

"To Turn the Tide"

If boys and girls can raise their intelligent quotients, then the practice of giving low marks because pupils fail to meet the perfection standard of faster learners surely is a practice that should be called into question. Some scholars are asking with some straining of their amiability is not the major purpose of teaching in the elementary and secondary schools to make young people efficient self-learners so that they can move forward under their own steam and at their own best pace.

"If You Don't Watch Out"

Now I shall return to Dr. Passow's constructive suggestion. If Dr. Melby were to reply to Dr. Passow personally, he might say that marks more than content of teaching methods help or dwarf the efforts of young people to develop the most that is within them. Instead of being disproportionate, Dr. Melby might defend the thesis that grades are the focal point for most educational change. To say it another way if the teacher cannot dismiss pupils with marks, he may have to change his content and teaching methods.

This discussion on grades brings back to memory so vividly the statement made by Thomas Jefferson on the twenty-third of September 1800: "I have sworn upon the altar of God external hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man."

Dr. Melby has deep feelings about marking systems. In the spirit of Thomas Jefferson, he may be convinced that grades and promotions are tyranning the mental lives of our young people.

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